

## ROBERT HILBURN

# Elton's Team in Top Form on 'Road'

In the continuing attempt to get the maximum from our limited album dollars, we've applied the strict YES/NO test (if the album doesn't deserve special attention, forget it) to five more best sellers. The result: three "save your moneys" and a couple of worthy investments.

**Elton John's** "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" (MCA 2-10003)—Not only has Elton John been one of our most versatile and entertaining record artists, he has also been one of our most prolific. This is his eighth album in four years—a two-record set that contains some of his most daring and ambitious work.

In much of "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road," we find the team of singer-composer-pianist John, lyricist Bernie Taupin and record producer Gus Dudgeon operating at its creative peak, moving through a variety of styles (from raucous humor to some gentle reflection) with equally impressive results.

Taupin, who has always had a fondness for storytelling, lets his imagination and narrative instincts run freer here than in any album since "Tumbleweed Connection" as he introduces us to some colorful, diverse characters, including a waterfront whore, a gangland hood and a housewife who courts young girls. There's a lively, sassy edge to these songs, from such lighter moments as a tongue-in-cheek taste of reggae to such spirited rockers as "Saturday Night's All Right for Fighting."

Taupin has also written some of his finest ballads in the title song (a reversal of the "Honky Cat" theme of escaping to the city), "This Song Has No Title" (a young innocent's discovery that it's an all too uninnocent world) and "Roy Rogers" (a tender look at aging and the loss of dreams).

John's vocals, as usual, are precisely tailored for the varying moods of the songs and the arrangements—many featuring dazzling use of synthesizer or other production effects—are typically infectious. The album's only problem is its quantity. Despite the many strengths, it doesn't overcome the general rule that any two-record set would be better if boiled down to a single record.



Elton John

The weaker tracks would be adequate by most artists' standards, but serve to break the pace and the consistency of the better moments here. Still the 10 or so highlights of the album make "Goodbye Yellow Brick Road" far too tempting to resist. YES.

**Leon Russell's** "Hank Wilson's Back, Vol. 1" (Shelter SW 8023—distributed by Capitol Records)—Since Russell was so well versed in the country and rhythm & blues roots that forged rock, you'd think this "return to my country roots" album would be a natural, but, despite backing by some able country musicians and some more than able country standards, it all sounds a bit unauthentic. If you're a rock fan who thinks Commander Cody is good country music, you may like this, but if you know Merle Haggard and Waylon Jennings are really where it's at, a far better "rock musician looks at country" album is John Fogerty's "Blue Ridge Rangers." NO.

**Marvin Gaye's** "Let's Get It On" (Tamla 329V1—distributed by Motown Records)—Gaye, who was quite philosophical in his highly successful "What's Goin' On" album, turns to more romantic concerns this time. The title tune was a strikingly sensuous hit single, but there's not much else in this album with the same impact. It'll sell a million or two, but don't say you weren't warned. NO.

**Van Morrison's** "Hard Nose the Highway" (Warner Bros. BS 2712)—Though this album has been available several weeks now, I've put off writing about it while I tried to figure out if side one was really as good as it seemed at the same time side two was as uninteresting as it seemed. After repeated listenings, I've decided it's true: Side one (which offers such interesting mood pieces as "Warm Love" and "Snow in San Anselmo" and such emotional commentaries as "The Great Deception" and the title song) is something special, but side two (including a lengthy, low-key, decidedly uneventful "Autumn Song") is far below what we expect from one of our finest contemporary talents. Still, side one is enough. YES.

**B. W. Stevenson's** "Pass This Way" (RCA APL1-008S)—Stevenson had a small hit earlier in the year with the original version of "Shambala" and now has a huge hit with "My Maria," one of the more dispensable singles of the season. He sings a lot like Billy Joe Shaver, a promising new writer from Nashville, but he sure doesn't write like him. The music is competent without being interesting. NO.